

LINCOLN AND DOUGLAS.

ADDRESS

OF

CHARLES EMORY SMITH,

POSTMASTER GENERAL,

AT THE

FORTY-FIRST ANNIVERSARY

OF THE

LINCOLN-DOUGLAS DEBATE

AT

GALESBURG, ILL., OCTOBER 7, 1899.



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We are here to commemorate the famous Lincoln-Douglas debate. On the very spot where we now stand the great combatants met forty-one years ago to-day in one of the brilliant encounters of that glittering intellectual and political tournament. Some of you saw and well remember the gleam and the blows of the flashing swords. With the vivid traditions and the striking figures ever living in the American memory and imagination, you can all picture the dramatic scene.

It is fit that the President with his Cabinet should come to this memorable ground. Here history was made and moulded. Here the mightiest issues of the age were tried in the forum of reason before being appealed to the arbitrament of arms. Here the two contending chieftains stamped their deep impress on the rushing current of thought and events which speedily culminated in the most gigantic moral and physical conflict of the century. Here may be found the inspiration of example and the lesson of experience.

The debate was worthy of this distinctive commemoration. It was the most significant and decisive dual controversy in our history. The only other forensic tourney which can compare with it was the celebrated discussion of Webster and Hayne nearly forty years before. Between the two there was indeed logical and historic connection. The one was the complement and the sequence of the other. The Webster-Hayne debate turned upon the abstract issue of an indissoluble Union as against the right of nullification and secession. The Lincoln-Douglas debate turned on the concrete struggle of freedom and slavery which brought on the War of the Rebellion and put the issue of Union against secession to the practical test. That debate presaged and crystallized the great coming conflict. It was the ominous thunder before the outbreak of the storm. In declaring and defining the irresistible tendencies, in fashioning the attitude and action of parties, in directly moulding the course of events, as it did, it was a potent and momentous element in the swift-advancing climax. Neither Lincoln nor Douglas sought the final and crucial clash. Both earnestly and anxiously labored against it. Each believed that his own policy was the true way to avert it. But their stupendous contention signified and shaped the irrepressible conflict and determined the political alignments and divisions which precipitated the ultimate and inevitable issue.

For more than thirty years the Missouri compromise had stood almost as sacred and venerated as the Constitution itself. It had been reverently cherished as one of the chief bulwarks of the public safety. Its sudden occasion and necessity had startlingly revealed the natural struggle of antagonistic forces, but its adoption had quelled the contest and restored tranquillity and confidence. At a later period and from time to time there had been passionate agitation, but the country reposed in the security of the settlement which had drawn a permanent and accepted boundary between the domains of freedom and slavery. The right of petition, the Mexican War and its ultimate aims, the Wilmot proviso, had all inflamed feeling and developed sentiment, but the aggressive issue involved in the imminence of dominant power on either side had not yet presented itself. Since the admission of Louisiana in 1812 the equilibrium of the free and slave States had been carefully preserved. Whenever a free State was added to the stars of the flag a slave State came in to balance it. Each section had an equal voice in the Senate and neither could overmaster the other.

But the time had come when the conditions were changed, and when in the majestic advance of the Republic the territorial march could not be restrained and could not be equalized. California, springing up like a giant with its boundless gold and its stalwart men, knocked for admission. The Mexican War had disappointed its authors. It brought no territorial compensations. The long averted danger of destroying the cherished balance was at hand. The country was feverish, excited and foreboding. Then Henry Clay, the great father of compromise, emerged from his retirement at the age of 73, and again led Congress and the people along the pathway of adjustment through the compromise of 1850. The momentary effect was magical. For a time the storm was calmed, and serene composure brooded over the face of the deep. But it was only for the hour. The resistless progress of the republic at once precipitated the same questions again. The magnificent empire beyond the Mississippi, long dormant, was now waiting for the eager and swelling tide of immigration which had advanced to its borders, and geography and economy, soil and settlers, all dedicated it to freedom. It is an interesting truth that our first great expansion in the Louisiana purchase, made by Jefferson to assure the untroubled navigation of the Mississippi, furnished the then unsought and almost unknown territory which became the turning point in the complete emancipation and redemption of the nation.

The North and the South entered upon the struggle for this domain. The North, quickened in its conscience, had rapidly developed a deep and earnest hostility to any further extension of slavery. The leaders of the South, astute, wary and watchful, were sincere in their conviction that extension of power and area was essential to its safety and perpetuity. They asserted the claim of protection within the Union or the right and obligation of self-defense outside of the Union. The Missouri compromise had pledged the now disputed territory to freedom, but in the exigencies of the new struggle the Missouri compromise was torn to shreds. The claim

was first put forward that this new territory should be equally open to the adoption of freedom or slavery, and that the inhabitants should determine the question for themselves. This was followed by the Dred Scott decision of the Supreme Court, which proclaimed that property in slaves was recognized by the Constitution, and that neither Congress nor the inhabitants of the Territories had the right to interfere with it. Under this menacing legislation and this portentous decision the battle raged for the possession of Kansas; violence sprang from the hot clash and the blood of partisans stained her fair fields; the Lecompton Constitution was framed to force slavery and was voted down; and after a long and convulsive contest the issue was still undetermined. The roar and the tumult of these tragic events had set the country aflame, and the souls of men were filled with the Crusaders' spirit by the intensity of a strife which stirred the conscience and the passions.

It was at this time and under these circumstances that Stephen A. Douglas, seeking re-election to the Senate, was challenged and confronted in joint debate by Abraham Lincoln. In its relations and its influence their discussion marked an epoch in our national history. The arena was Illinois; the amphitheatre was the whole country; the gladiators were the two most remarkable men of the time. Mr Douglas was then the foremost figure in public life. Calhoun, Clay and Webster, the great triumvirate of the middle period, had passed away. Benton and Cass had closed their careers. Seward and Chase had yet their highest place and fame to make. Buchanan was President, but was nerveless, plastic and without the fiber of the master. Douglas was left the most conspicuous chief on the stage of public action. He had been in the very center and thick of the stormy, fight of the previous four years, which at times had raged directly in and around his rugged personality, and his high courage, his independent action his combative power and his picturesque and perilous role concentrated the attention and interest of the country in an extraordinary degree.

He was placed in the most delicate and difficult position. He was the leader of the Northern Democracy, which was affected by the rising sense of the section on the question of slavery. At the same time, as a believer in party and party government—nay, more, as a patriot—he desired to preserve the unity of the party in both sections, and as an avowed and justifiable candidate for the Presidency, he had every interest in its solidity. The conflicting tendencies and demands strained his dexterity to the utmost. He yielded to the exaction that the Missouri compromise should be abrogated, and reported the Kansas-Nebraska bill with the fatal provision. He did it upon the plea that it was required by the policy of non-intervention in the Territories, and accompanied it with the doctrine of popular sovereignty, which, with many, had a captivating sound. But when the conspiracy of the Lecompton Constitution reared its head, he refused to go farther with it, and went forth like another Hercules, and slew it. More than any other influence, more than all other forces, his single-handed and intrepid warfare, in defiance of the Administration and the South, saved Kansas from that iniquity. These varying attitudes brought fluctuating

tides in his political fortunes. His participation in the repeal of the Missouri compromise offended the sentiment which had rested in that sacred settlement, and exposed him to reproach and obloquy. But his heroic resistance to the Lecompton wrong, while estranging the South, reinstated him in the esteem of his own section and crowned him with the halo of a fearless fighter and a victorious champion of right.

Fresh from that triumphant but hazardous battle, Douglas came to the contest and debate over his re-election. He came to it with extraordinary powers for such a trial. He was the most facile and trenchant debater of the day. He had unrivaled skill in parrying attack and in delivering blows. He was fertile and resourceful, quick to see any open joint in the armor of his opponent, and deft in piercing it. His equipment embraced every fact from the arsenal of political controversy, and he sent his lance with unerring force. His oratory, while rarely rising to eloquence, was direct, lucid, pungent and sinewy. He swayed the masses, not by the graces of rhetoric or the flights of fancy, but by his virile strength, his robust logic and his vehement intensity. To his devoted followers he was the "Little Giant," short and compact in stature, but towering in leadership and commanding in his aggressive energy.

His antagonist was of an altogether different mould. Mr. Lincoln had then no such personal prestige as his rival. He had played no important part on the national stage. But within his own State his rare attributes had placed him at the head of his party. He had none of the arts of sophistry, and could not seek to make the worse appear the better reason. He was frank, ingenuous and candid. The temper of his mind was philosophic rather than contentious. He searched for the truth, and in his faultless logic and profound conviction he followed the truth with heroic fidelity to its irresistible conclusion. He was honest with himself and honest with his hearers. He aimed at the enduring principle and not at the transient expediency or the momentary advantage. With all his openness, he was singularly acute and subtle in uncovering fallacy and unmasking deception, and always cool, self-poised and goodhumored, always sure of his own position and penetrating the flaw of his opponent's, he was a dangerous antagonist even for the prince of debaters.

Mr. Lincoln inaugurated his campaign with that bold and memorable declaration: "A house divided against itself cannot stand." I believe this Government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved; I do not expect the house to fall; but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other." Timid friends had deprecated and advised against this portentous deliverance. They feared it would expose Lincoln and his party to the odious charge of disunionism. But Lincoln rejected the trembling counsel and spoke the fateful words. He had deeply reflected on the mighty struggle and comprehended its full and far-reaching import. There are times—we have ourselves been witness of such an eventful time—when the chosen and destined leader of a great historic movement, rising above the doubts of the hour and the misgivings of the halting, must rely on his own

sure and saving sense and on his own communion with the future, and in such a crisis the true leader takes the responsibility. Mr. Lincoln was proclaiming a truth and not a purpose, and was dealing with a fact and not a plan. History has vindicated his prophetic vision, and even for the immediate contest he was wise. He saw a conflict which could only end in the supremacy of one idea or the other, and he sought to allay strife and assure peace by bringing the country back to the position of the fathers, where controversy would cease in the accepted faith that slavery was in course of ultimate extinction.

Douglas instantly seized on Lincoln's declaration and used it with artful power. He pictured the Union as having existed half free, half slave for over eighty years, strong in its very diversity, and skilfully appealed to the patriotic Union sentiment against what he denounced as a proclamation of sectional war. Lincoln, who had deliberately measured his ground, never faltered, but calmly and candidly justified his statement of a basic truth and developed it into a powerful argument for the cause and the policy he advocated. Then he in turn poised his lance for the attack. Douglas was the author and champion of the doctrine of popular sovereignty, which professedly left the people of the Territories to decide between freedom and slavery for themselves. He was constrained also to accept the Dred Scott decision, which carried slavery into the Territories under the Constitution, despite both Congress and the people. Out of these contradictory propositions Lincoln forged a weapon which inevitably impaled his antagonist on the one horn or the other of a fatal dilemma. "Can the people of a Territory," he demanded, "in any lawful way, against the wish of any citizen of the United States, exclude slavery from its limits prior to the formation of a State constitution?" The searching question pierced to the very heart of the whole fight. Again the timorous friends remonstrated. They pleaded that if Douglas was forced to answer he would make such choice as would satisfy Illinois and save the Senatorship. Lincoln knew better than they that Douglas could not make an answer that would gain the Senatorship without losing the Presidency, and, with his farsighted sagacity, he drove the question home.

Douglas could not answer that the people might directly exclude slavery, for that would contravene and nullify the Supreme Court decision. He could not answer that they were powerless, for that would contravene and nullify his doctrine of popular sovereignty. And so he dextrously found a way of doing indirectly what could not be done directly. He argued that slavery, though constructively present, could not maintain itself except by local support, and that the people of the Territories could practically exclude it by unfriendly legislation and police regulations. In other words, as Lincoln keenly pointed out, the answer was that slavery could be lawfully driven out under local law from a place where it could lawfully go under the supreme law. The weakness of the position was not that of the man, for no man could have met the dilemma more adroitly than Douglas, but it was the inherent weakness of the inescapable situation. Around these central points, with their varying

incidents and illuminating side lights, the whole debate proceeded. Douglas attacked Lincoln as the fomenter of sectional strife, as the advocate negro equality, and as the assailant of the Supreme Court. Lincoln attacked Douglas as the conjoint partner of slavery extension and as the champion of a political policy that reversed the theory of the fathers which treated slavery as a moral wrong to be gradually extinguished. If Douglas was clever, adroit and forceful, Lincoln was candid, incisive and persuasive, and his discussion rose to a moral elevation which reached beyond political expediency and touched the conscience of the country. The people followed the two masterful chieftains with intense and absorbed interest, and their commanding combat fixed the lines upon which the country rapidly moved to the most decisive and momentous events of its history.

The result vindicated Lincoln's judgment. It lost the immediate field, but gained the broad battle. It elected Douglas Senator, but made Lincoln President. The issues fought on this and other platforms of Illinois became the battle cries of the country, and the two great antagonists of the State contest were swept on to the leadership of the trial in the national arena. Lincoln was elected; the irreconcilable division which he had seen and sought to mend by a peaceful and regenerated national policy broke loose; the South appealed to arms; the "house divided against itself" threatened to fall; Lincoln, who had been charged with being a disunionist became the savior of the Union; and with a nobility not less glorious, Douglas, who had been his most strenuous opponent, became his staunchest supporter. The courageous leader, who had resolutely fought and defeated the Lecompton infamy, now for the second time rose above all partisanship to the loftiest heights of patriotism. When the struggle came he instantly and unreservedly took his stand with the Union and the flag, and he who had for years crossed swords with Lincoln, the partisan chief, showed his chivalrous loyalty and gave an inspiring and enduring example for all time, in marshaling his friends to uphold Lincoln, the patriot President. His service in that critical hour was inestimable. No other man had so large a personal following. He had more than a million devoted adherents, and, summoning them with bugle blast, his voice was all for his country. After his manly appeal had rung out from the capital, he returned to receive the grateful plaudits of his people, without distinction of party, and then, in the zenith of his fame, he passed to another sphere, and his stormy career was crowned with the undimmed and fadeless garlands of a patriotic and noble exaltation.

Lincoln lived to save the nation, and died to consecrate it with his blood. His unrivaled place among the world's elect is immutably fixed. He remains the best loved of all Americans. It is not merely that his gaunt and sombre and picturesque personality "deep on his front engraven deliberation sat and public care," has an enduring and irresistible fascination. It is not merely that he stands out among the most majestic figures in the world's mighty drama, and that of the builders and saviors of States who have moulded the decisive epochs in the world's progress, he is pre-eminent for moral heroism and grandeur. Beyond and beneath these imposing historic

proportions there is a magic of kinship and fate that brings him, above all others, close to the heart of the people. Around what other name, however great and honored, clusters so much of tender, sympathetic and impassioned sentiment? Where else will you find at once so much of the human quality that pulses to the common heart-beat; so much of the heroic consecration that uplifts the nation and exalts liberty, and so much of the pathos of tragedy that seemed to concentrate in one appalling blow a vicarious sacrifice for all the people?

Lincoln was the most typical of Americans. You can think of Washington as another Hampden, grand, serene, benign, the rounded and perfected archetype of English liberty. You can think of Hamilton as another Pitt, equally precocious, equally brilliant in eloquence and statecraft, equally master of the men and measures of his time. You can think of Webster as another Lord Mansfield in his massive legal creations, or another Lord Chatham in his majestic oratory and his imposing statesmanship. You can think even of Lincoln's fiery rival, Douglas, as another Charles James Fox, vehement, impetuous and fervid, the very Prince Rupert of debaters. But you cannot think of Lincoln as any other than a characteristic and unmistakable American. He was copied from no model and founded on no example. He blended and accentuated the recognized American traits, and stands out before the world as pre-eminently the American of Americans.

He was equally skilled in leading the leaders and in getting into the hearts of the plain people. No other American ever so thoroughly understood or came so close to the great throbbing masses. He sprang from their ranks and he continued to be their soul. Concentrate the genius of the common people in one grand incarnation, refining and sublimating their essence, to be then idealized in their adoration, and you call it Abraham Lincoln. He had at once the flavor of the soil and the flight of the stars. When he rose to large endeavor he had what seemed to be almost divine inspiration. Some of his papers in their simplicity, directness and strength are more like the epistles of St. Paul than anything else in literature. His speech was as lucent as crystal because his thought was as clear as the sunbeam. He was filled with sublime thoughts which transmuted themselves into sublime words and sublime acts. The imperishable speech at Gettysburg, which will ever remain the noblest monument of that immortal field, sprang from the greatness of his soul and reflected his inmost being. The second inaugural rose to a moral elevation not reached outside of sacred deliverance, and its lofty portraiture of the supreme law of justice and retribution in God's universe almost suggests the awful and mystic communion of Sinai.

The great lesson of Lincoln's matchless career and service is that he bravely accepted the duty which came to him and followed where its mandate led. He himself said he did not control events, but events controlled him. He was great enough to see their import and move forward with their requirements. He fought the extension of slavery, but had no purpose to interfere with it where it existed. When the war came his sole object was to save the Union, but as events unfolded and commanded, he

proclaimed emancipation. He did not seek to force the decree of destiny, but when it was revealed by the uplifted curtain he had the moral strength to execute it. If he were President to-day, he would maintain the honor of the flag, uphold the dignity of the nation and advance its high mission of liberty, humanity and civilization, as his faithful successor is doing. His example and his inspiration live for all time. The appreciation of his great personality and his true historic grandeur increases as we gain the juster perspective of distance, and the sanctity of his memory will deepen in the hearts of his countrymen as the sublimity of his service and the mystery of his martyrdom become more and more the loftiest legend of our national story.

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